

OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME ONLINE HOMEWORK HELP IN CALIFORNIA LIBRARIES: AN EVALUATION STUDY

Submitted to the California State Library by
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mediavilla and Walter looked at the two vendors providing Out-of-School-Time Online Homework Help (OST OHH) with partial or complete subsidies from the California State Library – Tutor.com and Brainfuse. The objectives were to determine the effectiveness of each vendor in meeting student needs and the level of satisfaction libraries have for the program, as well as to identify the distinguishing features of each vendor

Both English and Spanish language transcripts from each vendor were analyzed. A SurveyMonkey instrument was sent to each library asking for a librarian familiar with the service to answer questions indicating student, parent, and staff satisfaction. Five library administrators were interviewed. Each library web site was examined to determine how the service was being marketed through that medium, and the vendors were surveyed in order to compare services and features provided by each.

RESULTS

Math inquiries continue to top the list of student requests. Success rates for the two vendors' English language services are comparable: 63% for Tutor.com and 69% for Brainfuse. Reasons for unsuccessful sessions included communication and technical issues and cases of students abandoning the session as well as tutor ineffectiveness. There are still not enough Spanish language inquiries to draw conclusions about patterns of usage.

Librarians who responded to the SurveyMonkey questionnaire reported general satisfaction with the service. 44% of them relied on OST OHH to be their only form of homework assistance, while 56% also offered some onsite assistance as well. They all claim to publicize the service through the library web site and posters in the library, and 96% also promote it through schools. Still, publicizing the service is still the biggest challenge to increasing usage. An examination of library homepages showed that not all libraries highlighted the service as prominently or effectively as they could have.

Library administrators all claimed that supporting students was important to their overall mission and that OST OHH was an integral aspect of that service. They report few problems. The overwhelming number of inquiries is from remote sites, typically from students working at home. In some rural and less affluent communities, remote usage is a problem because of poor connectivity and the lack of computers in the home. These libraries look for ways to make in-library use of the service easier and more attractive to their patrons.

Cost is the single biggest drawback to the service. Participating libraries are grateful for the initial subsidies provided by the State Library, particularly since it is a nontraditional library service that is evidently slow to catch on.

The services provided by the two vendors are similar.

Two areas in which participating libraries would like to see continuing State Library support are marketing and building formal partnerships with schools and homeschooling networks.